The Pacer

www.thepacer.net • April 17, 2026 • Volume 98, Issue 6

The Independent Voice of the University of Tennessee at Martin

Spring 2026 commencement speaker: Tonya Parson

Ryleigh Ulen | Pacer Staff

The University of Tennessee at Martin's 2026 spring commencement speaker will be Tonya Parson, a nurse practitioner from Memphis, Tennessee and a 1993 graduate from UT Martin.

Parson is the owner and CEO of NP Cares, a health and wellness clinic located in Cordova, Tennessee. She also serves as the executive director for the Memphis branch of Passport Health, a travel immunization and health franchise.

Parson received her bachelor's degree in biology from UT Martin in 1993 before obtaining a second bachelor's degree in nursing from the Baptist College of Health Sciences in Memphis in 1999. She later received a master's degree in acute and critical care nursing from the UT Health Science Center in 2004.

Parson has been the recipient of several honors and awards throughout her career, including being named Caregiver of the Year from the Tennessee Hospital Association and being named to the "Top 100 Nurses in Shelby County" in 2006. She was the 2018 recipient of UT Martin's Outstanding Alumni Award, which is presented to a university alum for outstanding achievement in their career.

While at UT Martin, Parson was initiated into the Eta Xi chapter of Delta Sigma Theta in spring 1991 and is currently a member of the Memphis Alumnae Chapter of Delta Sigma Theta.

For UT Martin Chief of Staff Jake Bynum, Parson's successful career isn't the only reason she was an ideal fit to be this spring's commencement speaker. Parson has continued to be involved with the university and find ways to give back to the current student body.

See PARSON on page 4 for continued story

Tonya Parson, 2024
(Photo provided by University Relations)

The Food Genie serves more than meals to Martin

Ella Hasty | Pacer Staff

Before Quincey Porter was serving the Martin, Tennessee, community his best soul food dishes and eight specialty burgers, he was selling $6 plates out of his mother-in-law's living room in Memphis.

On July 21, 2025, Martin gained a restaurant that would positively impact the community in more ways than one. Mechele and Quincey Porter, originally from Memphis, Tennessee, are the owners of The Food Genie. While the restaurant might be new to Martin, The Food Genie has been serving people since 2017.

The couple started by selling $6 plates out of Mechele's mother's living room. At the time, Quincey balanced his job with leading Bible studies, workout classes and mentoring sessions, all in the same day.

"One day, a guy made a joke. He said, 'Man, you're sort of like a genie,'" Quincey said. The name "The Food Genie" was born.

Selling plates out of the living room lasted for two months. Then, in 2018, they rented a kitchen area inside a BP Gas Station in Memphis. They were located there for one year before deciding to sell the store and relocate to Martin, but it would still be a few years before Martin got its own location.

In 2020, the Porter's opened their first sitting location in Trezevant, Tennessee. They were there until they moved to Union City, Tennessee, in 2022. The Union City location was limited in size, so the couple eventually decided to close it down in 2024 and focus strictly on catering. Around this time, the current location at 120 Hurt Street was a vacant building.

"Matter of fact, he actually prayed on this parking lot, two or three years ago, when it was empty," said Mechele. A few years later, the prayer was answered when the building became available.

Since moving to the Hurt Street location almost a year ago, The Food Genie has quickly become a local favorite. Students, staff, families and even Chancellor Yancy Freeman and his family frequent the restaurant. As a University of Tennessee at Martin alumna, Mechele is happy to offer UT Martin students and staff a 10% discount on their orders.

"Students love 'The Genie Burger,'" Mechele said. "It's bacon, egg and cheese on a burger with sauce."

Quincey has a newfound favorite called the "Philadelphia Burger."

"It's a double cheeseburger with a Philly cheese steak on top, and bacon and egg on top of that," said Quincey. "It's a monster burger."

Customers love Quincey's food so much that The Food Genie has catered for events such as birthdays, weddings, corporate dinners and school lunches. The restaurant's success is largely due to the supportive relationship that Mechele and Quincey have. Mechele keeps the front of the store organized by taking orders and ensuring everything is correct; meanwhile, Quincey gets to the restaurant early to begin making the food. In total, a team of seven keeps the restaurant running smoothly.

"I have a newfound respect for others when I go to other places to sit down and eat," Quincey said. "If I have a long wait period, it's not that big of a deal because I understand."

Quincey, who has earned himself the nickname "The Genie," holds multiple roles outside of the restaurant. He is also a minister at Visions Community Baptist Church in Union City. This leads many people to come to the restaurant for prayer, rather than just a meal.

"They ask, 'Can you pray for me?' and he wraps up his food, and he'll come over there and pray," said Mechele.

The Food Genie's community impact doesn't stop there. They also donate to the Captain's Pantry at UT Martin, including recently donating 32 emergency food boxes to be distributed to pantries on campus. Students and those in need can also come into the restaurant to receive boxes.

To celebrate their first anniversary of being in Martin, there will be a ribbon-cutting at The Food Genie on July 17, 2026, at 11:30 a.m. with the Martin Business Association and the Weakley County Chamber of Commerce.

Owners of The Food Genie Mechele and Quincey Porter stand outside their restaurant on Feb. 20, 2026. ***(Pacer Photo / Miranda Conrad)***

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Answers: Finals, Summer, Graduation, Study, Vacation

Seek Truth

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2026 Commencement Ceremonies

Ceremony 1
Sat., May 2 at 10 a.m.

Colleges:
Agriculture and Applied Sciences
Business and Global Affairs
Engineering and Natural Sciences
Humanities and Fine Arts

Ceremony 2
Sat., May 2
at 2 p.m.

College of Education, Health and Behavioral Sciences

Graduates and guests should arrive no earlier than 45 minutes before the ceremony.

Graduates will enter through the main entrance of the Tom and Kathleen Elam Center and go down the stairs to floor level. Seats will be assigned for each graduate.

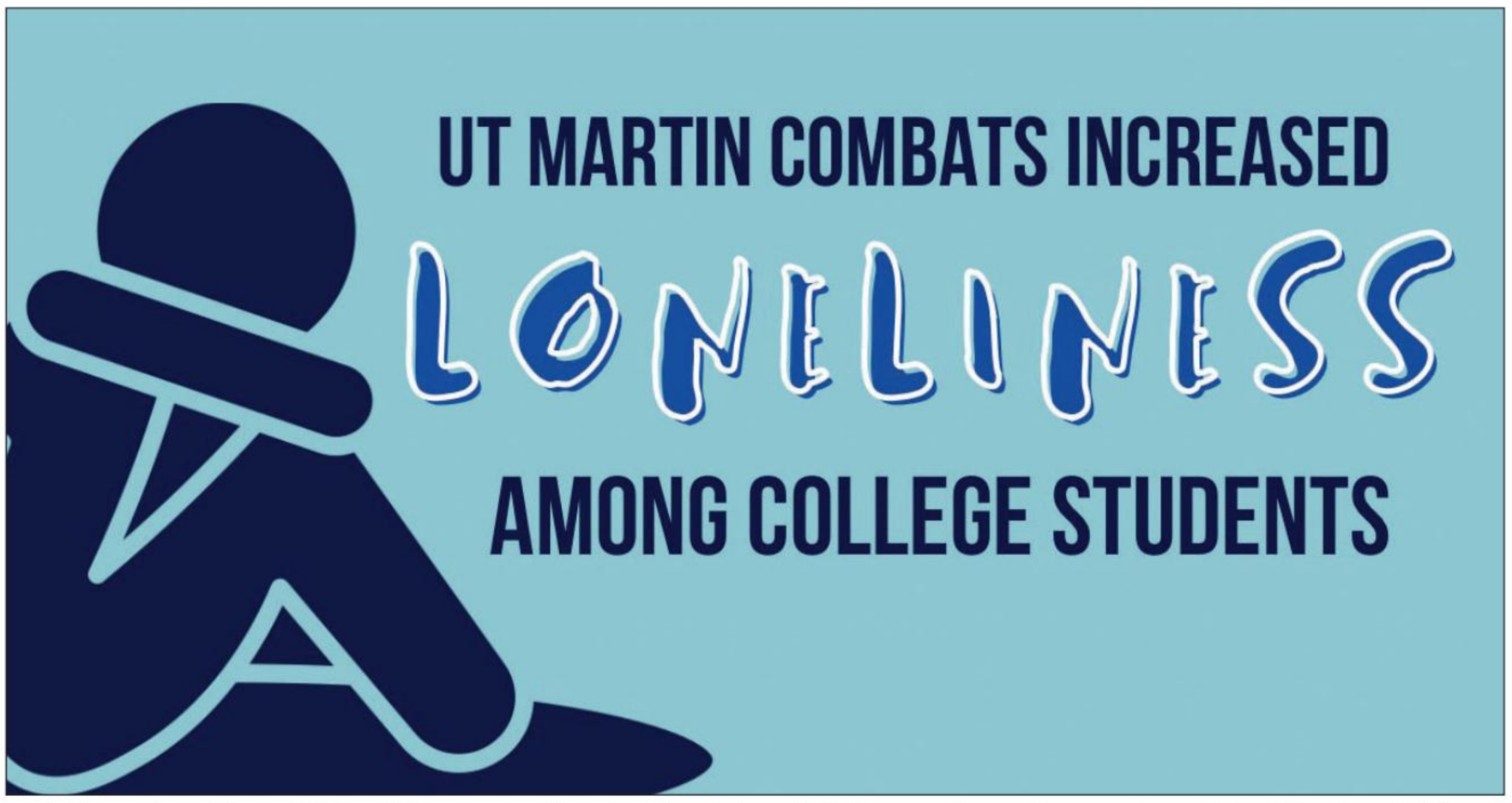
The University has a professional photographer for both ceremonies.

Pictures can be purchased from the link found on UTM.edu.

(Pacer Graphics by Miranda Conrad)

UT Martin combats college student loneliness

Ryleigh Ulen | Pacer Staff



(Pacer Graphic / Darby Self)

A 2025 report by Trellis Strategies, using data from their 2024 Student Financial Wellness Survey, revealed that more than half of all college students reported feeling either sometimes or always lonely.

According to a 2023 advisory by U.S. Surgeon General Dr. Vivek Murthy, a lack of social connection can hinder students both socially and academically, but having connections with others can help students improve their attendance, grades and overall health.

At the University of Tennessee at Martin, multiple programs and organizations exist to help students get involved and connect them with various resources.

Rachel Martin, director of student involvement and a UT Martin alumna, said the connections she made during her time as a student made all the difference in her college experience.

"I tell people all the time, when you come to UTM, you're going to get a great education," said Martin, "but what really made the difference for me was the things that I did outside the classroom, or the experiences that started in the classroom but then went out of it. Whether that was from the organizations that I joined or the friends that I made or the groups that I was a part of, that's what really made that difference."

Martin works with groups across campus to create a schedule with every event happening at the university. This cross-campus collaboration helps ensure there is always an event going on, increases the variety of activities offered and allows organizations to co-sponsor events to make them better for students.

Martin also works with organizations to ensure that events are being promoted to students. All students receive an email at the beginning of each week with upcoming events, and they can also see events by accessing Runway through either their UT Martin portal or by downloading the Corq app.

UT Martin is also home to various spaces on campus designed for the purpose of connection, including the CommUnity Center.

CommUnity Center Director and Assistant Director of Student Success Counseling Tammy Jo Stanford has seen firsthand how connection plays into student success.

"I think that academic success comes from belonging," said Stanford. "You know, if you don't have your people, if you don't have a group of folks that make you feel important and heard and seen, that success is harder to come by."

The CommUnity Center, located in Room 255 in the Paul Meek Library, is a space for students to connect and relax with friends. Along with weekly activities such as diamond painting and crocheting, the center hosts multiple events throughout the semester with the goal of bringing students together. It also serves as the meeting space for organizations like SPECTRUM and the Women's Student Alliance.

Bailey Parker, a junior finance major from Lexington, Tennessee, has been heavily involved on campus throughout her time at UT Martin, including her current tenure as Student Government Association (SGA) President. Parker believes that keeping students at UT Martin is connected to how involved they feel they can be.

"The way to get students to stay here, retention, is by getting them involved… building a home away from where you grew up is important, and you do that by going to events, meeting new people, and feeling like you're involved and included," said Parker. "So in SGA, I like to be transparent so that students know what's going on so that they can feel more involved in what's going on here at UTM."

Parker also recognizes the importance of collaboration with other organizations on campus in order to maximize the number of students SGA can reach.

"I feel like what SGA can do to reach [more] students where they are is by collaborating with other organizations," said Parker. "We have about 60 members, but if we can collaborate with organizations that have 100 members or 50 or however many, they have their own web of connections on campus that if we're doing an event with them, they're going to reach out to their web and say, 'Hey, come out to this', and hopefully it's just like a domino effect."

On April 2, SGA announced the addition of a wellness page to students' Canvas accounts to provide a central location for student resources, including Student Health and Counseling and Student Conduct and Care.

For Martin, her biggest piece of advice for students is to take advantage of being in college and reach out to others.

"I've been working in this area for about 15 years now professionally, and one of the biggest things I see is there is a lot more loneliness now… people are hurting. People are sad. People are stressed. The state of the world is very chaotic. But there's so many ways to get connected," said Martin. "There are so many ways to get outside your comfort zone, and this is the time to do it because everybody, even if you don't think they are, everybody's looking for friends. It'll never be easier to make friends than it is when you're in college."

For students experiencing loneliness, both Martin and Stanford encourage students to ask for help and utilize campus resources.

"I want to make sure that students know that they're not here alone doing any of this, ever," said Stanford. "We've always got lots of help."

Alpha Psi Lambda aims to promote community

Ja'Tyria Greer | Pacer Staff

A national Latino-interest fraternity founded on the principles of unity, education and cultural pride is taking root at the University of Tennessee at Martin, as students launch a new chapter of Alpha Psi Lambda aimed at creating a stronger sense of belonging on campus.

The organization, established in 1985 at Ohio State University, is the nation's first co-educational Latino-interest fraternity and has expanded to campuses across the U.S. Its mission emphasizes academic achievement, cultural awareness and leadership development while providing students a supportive "family" structure in college.

At UT Martin, student leaders say the new chapter is already filling a need for connection.

"I feel very honored because the members had to vote me in for that," said Yadira Balderas Cruz, the chapter's captain, which is a role comparable to president. "I'm really excited because there's something different, and I've always wanted to be a part of something bigger."

Cruz said the idea of bringing the organization to campus began through a student conversation and quickly turned into action. She said she saw it as an opportunity to create a space where students could find both academic encouragement and cultural understanding.

"It's sometimes hard to find a place where students like me fit in," Cruz said. "We thought this would be a great way to find a safe space and a community here on campus."

For Cruz, the fraternity also connects closely to her personal background and long-term goals in education. She is a K-5 education major, and she said those studies influence her leadership style.

"Being an education major makes you have to be adaptable," Cruz said. "You also need to not only think about yourself, but think about others' ideas and perspectives. That's something I brought into this."

She said the chapter is still in a transitional stage as it works toward full recognition by the university, which has created challenges in securing meeting spaces and resources. However, collaboration with other campus groups has helped keep efforts moving forward.

"We are very limited on the things you could do," Cruz said. "But a lot of organizations are willing to help."

Among those involved is Nallely Ortiz, who serves as anchor, or vice president, of the new chapter. Ortiz said her role focuses on supporting leadership and helping guide the organization when needed.

"It means that I can support our captain and, together, promote our culture, organize events and lead the organization with the support of my brothers and sisters," Ortiz said. "I am happy to be a symbol of stability and strength in our organization."

Ortiz, who was born and raised in Mexico, said the fraternity allows her to share values that are deeply rooted in her upbringing.

"Unity, the importance of family, and respect to other people… those are very important values in the Latin culture," Ortiz said. "I am happy to be able to promote these values with more people."

Although she was not involved in initially founding the chapter effort, Ortiz said she chose to join after learning about the organization through an informational meeting.

"I decided that I wanted to join them and help make this a reality," Ortiz said. "I am happy to know that Latinos, and anyone who is looking for a family, can join us and feel supported."

Both student leaders said the chapter is about more than just cultural identity; it is about building community for students who may feel overlooked.

Cruz said the goal is to create a lasting support system on campus.

"We just need to create a community for students like us who sometimes may not find a community here at the university," Cruz said.

As the chapter continues to grow, students involved believe it will strengthen inclusion efforts at UT Martin by giving more students a space to connect and feel at home. Students say they hope the chapter will remain a lasting home for connection.

MMSC awards celebrate department success

Chyler Lee | Pacer Staff

On April 9, in the University Center ballroom, the UT Martin Mass Media of Strategic Communication (MMSC) department held their annual award ceremony to recognize the department's success.

The highest honors of the night went to department alumni Trey Warren and Scott Hinshelwood for their achievements after leaving UT Martin.

Warren, a 2017 UTM graduate, was the recipient of the Outstanding Young Alumni Award. He is currently a Senior Client Executive for Microsoft. After getting his Bachelor of Arts in Communications, Warren secured his MBA from Clayton University and worked his way up the ranks at UPS before joining Microsoft in September 2022.

After accepting his award, Warren offered a short but sweet speech about his time at UT Martin and how he has found success after college—finishing with, "Invest in the people here and they will invest in you."

"I think it's just really important to understand where you come from and understand that the people that supported you then are still supporting students now," said Warren. "I think that's really encouraging and I hope to continue to be a part of that moving forward."

When asked to give one message to the students, Warren said, "Tough times don't last. Tough people do."

Along with Warren was 1997 graduate Scott Hinshelwood who received the Distinguished Alumni Award for his 28+ years of work with St. Jude Children's Research Hospital.

Hinshelwood was a classmate of MMSC professor and Department Chair Tracy Rutledge who hosted the event for the first time since being appointed Chair in January.

Rutledge and Hinshelwood both recalled memories of working together in the department even beyond normal school hours.

"We would let the door to the computer lab close, turn off the light and hide in the back so when security came out to check it, they'd leave and then we can stay up later in the labs, and we can keep working," Hinshelwood said. "Hypothetically, I knew people that did that."

Along with the alumni awards, students were not only recognized for their accomplishments, but also able to present their work before the event—a new addition to the awards this year.

"It's a great way for guests and donors and supporters to also see what [students are] doing," said Rutledge. "I thought it brought a good energy to it and made it more student focused."

The displays included written work, social media posts, radio broadcasts, video productions and media designs produced by students during their time at UT Martin.

Students also received awards and scholarships in their respective concentrations.

Winners for accomplishments in broadcastings included Izzy Burdette, Maddy Kennedy, Riley Rushing, Jacob Sullivan, Christian Bryson and Daniel Mancusi; for accomplishments in journalism included Bethany Collins, Nate Szarzynski, Ethan Tanner, Ryleigh Ulen, Maddy Kennedy and Chloe Kent; for accomplishments in media design included Sophia Phillips, Aubrey Abbott, Carson Alexander, Darby Self, Dylan Sulcer and Riley Thompson; for accomplishments in public relations included Ryleigh Ulen, Bella Bone, Lacie Coleman, James Crowell, Dylan Sulcer and Maddy Kennedy; for accomplishments in public speaking included Ariel Leon and Lillian Otto.

The department also awarded departmental awards/scholarships that applied to any student in the department. Freshman, sophomore, junior and senior scholarships which awarded $1,500 dollars to each recipient; the recipients were Caleb Buchanan, Owen Kreuziger and Case Gatlin for the freshman scholarship awarded to incoming freshmen; Ty Bartlett received the sophomore scholarship for a current freshman; Daniel Mancusi received the junior scholarship for a current sophomore and Maddy Kennedy received the senior scholarship for a current junior.

Chloe Kent was the recipient of the Outstanding Non-Traditional Student Award for the second year in a row. Recipients of the Ambassador award included Jayda Disney, James Crowell and Michaela Gallian.

Finally, the department awarded four students the Outstanding Senior Awards for their respective concentrations. Winners were Katelyn Cohee in Broadcasting, Chyler Lee in Journalism, Michaela Gallian in Public Relations and Chloe Kent in Media Design.

The ceremony concluded by honoring professors Richard Robinson for 25 years with the department, and Robert Nanney for serving as Department Chair for 25 years — Nanney stepped down in January and was succeeded by Rutledge.

UT Martin alumnus Trey Warren speaks to students and faculty at Mass Media and Strategic Communication awards in the UC Ballroom on April 9, 2026. ***(Photo provided by MMSC)***

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"In addition to her success, she's been a great supporter of the institution and has been active in several organizations related to the university," said Bynum. "She has been involved with Black Alumni Council… she's been involved in the Chancellor's Round Table and is most recently the chair of the Chancellor's Round Table, and she is also involved in the university's Alumni Council and has been involved in that organization as well.

She's also been a huge supporter in our efforts to recruit students, especially out of the Shelby County market, which is where she's located."

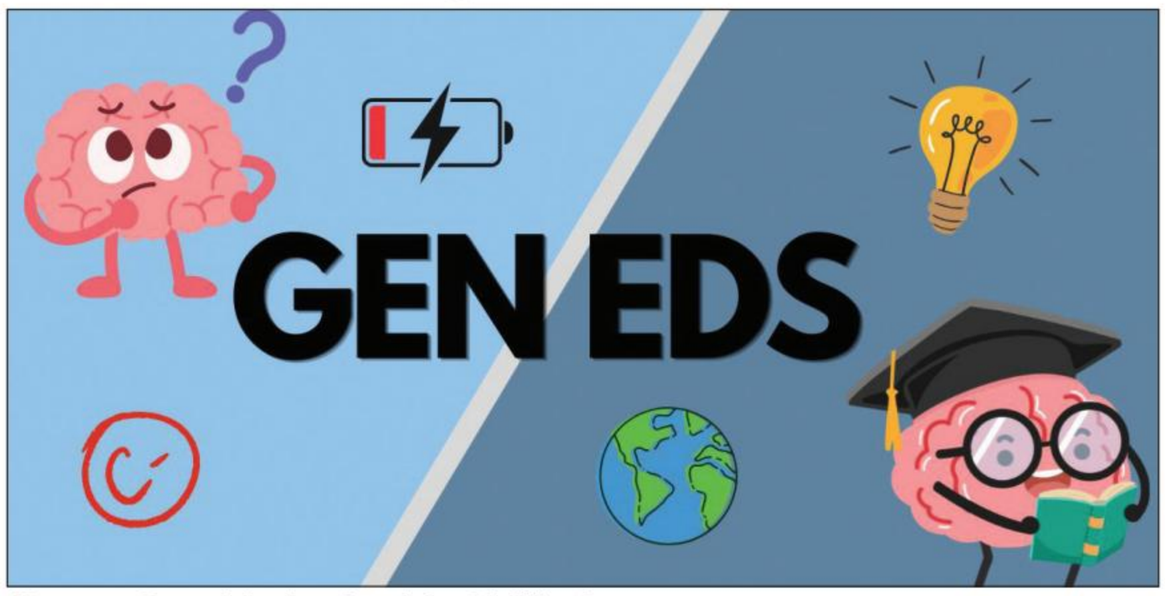
Bynum hopes that students are able to use Parson's story as an example of what they can accomplish with a degree from UT Martin.

"Tonya is extremely passionate about her support of UT Martin. I think she very much credits her undergraduate experience as being kind of the catalyst that then pushed her forward…there's this understanding that you really can do anything and go anywhere from UT Martin, and I think Tonya really exemplifies that work and that thought," said Bynum. "I think that she will be able to provide a message to our graduating students, that they can be and go out and achieve success regardless of where they came from, where they lived, what background they had, that they can be really successful because they now have a degree from UT Martin."

Pacer Graphic / Sophia Phillips

The pros and cons of general education courses

Keenan Wilson & Cathleen Whitson I Pacer Staff



(Pacer Graphic by Sophia Phillips)

There's a moment every college student has at least once in their academic career.

Imagine sitting in a class completely unrelated to your major. Maybe it's a math lecture for a journalism student, or a biology lab for an English major, and you cannot help but think: Why am I even here?

It is not dramatic; it's more practical. Between rising tuition, tight schedules and the pressure of graduating on time, every second in college matters. These classes are not just academic; they are financial, and that is where general education classes cause the most debate.

For those who don't know, gen eds are classes every college student is required to take. They are designed to expose students to different fields and help create critical thinking, adaptability and a broader understanding of the world.

On paper, this idea is genius, but in practice, many will argue they are a waste of time.

In practice, students aren't just trying to learn; they are trying to actively manage money and time in an unstable environment. This is especially amplified in the United States, where the cost of going to college is exponentially climbing higher and higher.

Each required course means more tuition, more textbooks and, in some cases, longer graduation times. According to Inside Higher Ed, 61 percent of college students graduate in six years. This means that only four out of every 10 students graduate on time, if they even graduate at all.

Because if college is increasingly framed as an almost religiously required thing kids do after high school and are constantly told by their family and peers to think about a job, then why are they required to spend time and money on classes that don't help their goal at all?

That's the tension in the gen ed debate.

However, that doesn't mean the other side of the debate is wrong.

This side of the base stems from the fact that only about 27% of college graduates actually work in the field they majored in, according to Expert Beacon. That means that nearly three out of every four college graduates end up in a career where their major-specific knowledge is not used.

In a context such as that, having that broad understanding and adaptability makes sense and can be incredibly useful in today's ever-changing job market.

The real question is which side is correct if both sides have valid points. Maybe the answer is both, and the wrong problem is being addressed.

The problem is not the idea of general education and whether it should exist altogether. The problem is the way it's applied. When gen eds start to feel disconnected, rushed or irrelevant, their purpose starts to fall apart. Instead of creating well-rounded students, they create frustrated ones.

So the best solution wouldn't be to get rid of gen eds—it would be to evolve them. Gen ed classes need to be more relevant and inflexible in a way that connects them to the reality of students every day.

Because when you're paying thousands of dollars, that's debt you owe to get a piece of paper or a degree that is supposed to solve your problems if it hangs on your wall. Being well-rounded should not have to feel like a requirement.

It should feel like something that's actually worth something.

Energy drinks are becoming a problem

Lauren Davis I Pacer Staff

There are young adults out there who are drinking energy drinks like water, even on the campus of UT Martin.

I knew one of them.

When we were freshmen in college, he was in the process of moving out to go to a different university when the year was up, and I offered to help him clean up and pack. We had gathered five gallon bags stuffed full with only energy drink cans.

A lot of the drinks were provided by the school from the Moonlight Breakfast before there was a restriction on how many drinks you could take. They had given him multiple boxes of Rockstar Energy drinks that he ended up drinking like water over the rest of the semester. In addition to those, he would buy a few Monster Energy drinks a day from On-the-Fly and drink them all throughout the day.

He was just one example of the students probably on campus who deal with this level of energy drink addiction.

Energy drinks are able to be bought by anyone, with no age cap, from stores across the county. There are only some local restrictions for people under 18. In a research project led by PubMed, it aimed to track the consumption of energy drinks among college-aged students. Out of 496 participants, they found that 51% drink more than one energy drink per month with the intent of staying awake or increasing energy. According to the research, the most common reason college students drink them is to increase energy, while the lowest statistic was to treat a hangover.

Addiction to these drinks is commonplace with college students when it comes to staying awake for assignments, driving cars for extended periods of time or pulling all-nighters. The common price for a Monster Energy at the Dollar Store is $2.58 per can, with promotions such as three for $7.

Students like my friend are able to buy these drinks due to the affordable price and the lack of restrictions on them. It enables a very real addiction and poses a major threat to students' health.

Common side effects of energy drink consumption include heart palpitations, high blood pressure, insomnia, raised anxiety and dehydration. These drinks send 200,000 people to the emergency room annually. If a person is not careful, overconsumption can lead to seizures and cardiac arrhythmia.

If you have an energy drink addiction, please limit yourself to at least once a day, maybe even once a week, for your own health. They are OK if consumed in moderation, but not in place of water.

Americans shouldn't need side jobs to live

Keenan Wilson I Pacer Staff

For years now, "side hustles" have been a way to make a little extra money; however, for many people today, they are more than that: they are the way to get enough money to survive.

Across the United States, the rising cost of everyday amenities and the struggling job market has forced many people to look for income anywhere they can get it. This has led to an increase in second jobs and side hustles just to keep the bills paid. In many cases, people have turned to industries that they never imagined simply to keep the lights on.

Recently, a story was published in Esquire by author Polona Karr, where she details how she worked at a legal Nevada brothel to make ends meet. She explains that after a breakup, she was left with an apartment that, with her job as an author, she could not afford. She describes how she slipped into brothel work to pay her rent.

This is not an uncommon story. There are hundreds, if not thousands, of people who live this story throughout their lives, needing to turn to side hustles and outside work to stay afloat.

According to Side Hustle Nation, 39 percent of Americans have a side hustle, with 70 percent of Gen Z looking for a side hustle.

Situations like these reveal a troubling truth about the current economic state. They show that people are not choosing these jobs out of want or enjoyment; they have no other option.

Side hustles are supposed to be a way to gain extra money. They are meant to help afford extra items when people want them, not for paying bills when the primary job cannot provide enough.

Economic hardships are nothing new to Americans, but when they become a large-scale thing where stories of people needing second jobs continue to rise, it raises an uncomfortable question: if people already must sell more and more of themselves just to survive, where is the line drawn? Where do we collectively agree that the job market today is shattered and broken, almost too far beyond repair?

It is sad that in today's economy, side jobs are necessary to live comfortably. However, with the rising price of life amenities such as groceries, gas and especially living, traditional job employment alone is no longer enough for most Americans to keep up their everyday expenses.

Senior farewell: Chyler Lee

Chyler Lee | Pacer Staff

I joined The Pacer in the spring semester of 2024. It was immediately after a time in which I was most confused about where my path was going. I spent my first year and a half in Martin as a biology major and planned to become a marine biologist—I like sharks. Throughout my time in that program, I slowly started to wear down until I was sitting in one of my classes and realized that I simply wasn't interested anymore. That moment was when I turned to journalism.

I didn't tell anybody about my decision, nor did I know anyone in the communications department besides Ms. Freed, who had the herculean task of making me a good public speaker. Immediately after my major change, I had to register for classes. Dr. Nanney was the first professor to sit with me and go over my classes and my future career. He was a perfect introduction to the program for me. He wasn't too serious but had a calm air about him that let you know he knew what he was doing—it made me feel confident about my future in the department and excited for what's to come.

I want to thank the first three people that were my friends in the department.

First is Ms. Tomi McCutchen, whose kindness was impossible to escape from and her boundless compassion for each and every person. Ms. Tomi not only showed me the ropes of actual journalism but introduced me to my new coworkers and now lifelong friends.

Connor and Nate graciously met with me after a class one afternoon as I was hoping to join The Pacer as a sports writer, and we had the great opportunity to talk ball. Both fans of the Chicago Bears—made obvious by their jerseys—Connor and Nate were already friends, but they couldn't have been more different from each other.

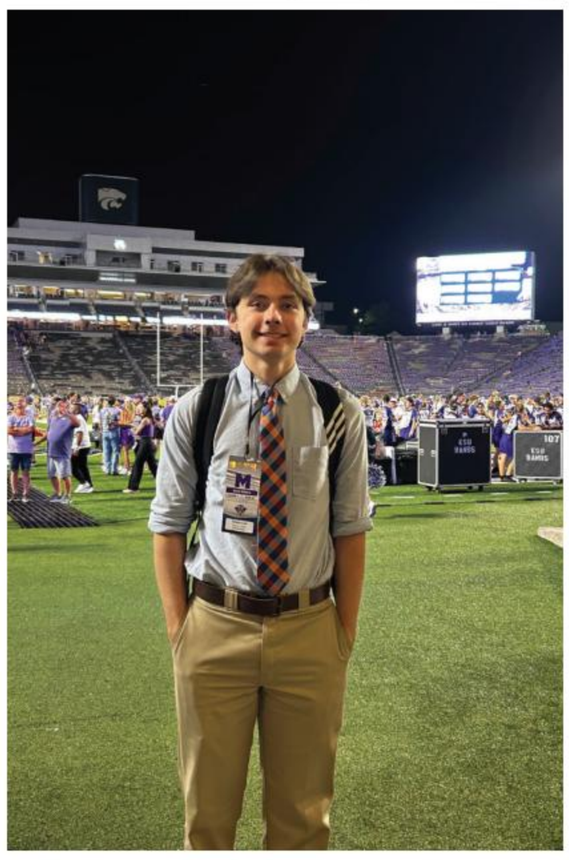
Connor showed me how simple life can be, and I credit him with my decreased anxiety. He wasn't afraid to say what he wanted, even if he didn't think it through all the way. Some people shouldn't live this way, but for Connor, it's just right.

Nate made me think through life more, not just at school but in the moments in between. Aside from me joking that he's 80, his wisdom and support would've been sorely missed had we not met.

I want to thank Dr. Plotner, who instilled an attitude in the newsroom and throughout the staff that cannot be replaced. Despite just a year with The Pacer, her impact will be felt in newsrooms and organizations around the country as we go into the real world.

Finally, I want to thank my friends that have helped me and our paper this year. Chloe, William, Ryleigh, Darby, Bryant, Bethany, Ethan, Miranda, Clarissa, Sarah, Erika, Marques, Adrianna, Bella, Cathleen, Gwen, Isaiah, Izzy, Ja'Tyria, Kaniya, Keenan, Lauren, Madison, Martin, Miracle, Rose, Sophia and Ella.

Thank you all—you are amazing. The work starts now. Bye.



Chyler Lee at Kansas State University on Aug. 31, 2024. ***(Provided Photo)***

Bethany Collins, Chloe Kent, Kayli Plotner, Chyler Lee and Nate Szarzynski pose for a photo at the MMSC Awards ceremony on April 9, 2026. ***(Photo provided by MMSC Department)***

Senior farewell: Chloe Kent

Chloe Kent | Pacer Staff

First, I think it's important for you to listen to "Au revoir (Adios)" by The Front Bottoms while you read this.

When I came to UT Martin, I didn't know how I would fit into the university. I was a transfer student as well as a nontraditional student, turning 25 the second week of my junior year. If I thank everyone who deserves a thank you in this, it would easily be 3,000 words. So, I am just going to hit a few of the people. If I didn't include you, I'm sorry — it's not personal. Love ya, mean it.

First, one of my very best friends and the person who has seen me cry about 4,000 times this school year, Miranda Conrad. Mir Mir, I don't think you realize how much you have changed me as a person. I don't think I would have made it — taking 18 credit hours, on top of working two jobs — if I didn't have your shoulder to cry on every day. You are a friend that I feel like I don't deserve. You deserve everything good in this world and anybody who says anything different is wrong. You will do great things because you are a good person.

Clarissa Spitzley, who I became inseparable with. You are always cheering me on even after you graduated last spring. You are always down to listen to my insane ideas, listen to my rants and are the first person to say you're proud of me. I owe a lot of my Adobe Illustrator knowledge to you. You are the definition of a best friend.

Dr. Kristi Gatto, you have been such a big cheerleader of mine, guiding me along the way through this department. We were both new to UT Martin when I got here, and you helped me figure out my passion. You are the best adviser and an even greater friend. Thank you for treating me not only like a student, but as a friend who could talk to you about how stressed school was making me. You also have helped me learn to say no. I know I still have trouble with that. I am sure you will keep reminding me. You also make good baked ziti.

The Pacer staff and WUTM staff, you quickly became my family. You all have played a major part in my life, and I owe you all a lot. Thank you for putting trust in our friendships and in my work. Thank you for always reminding me I am the old person on the staff. Serving as the managing editor for The Pacer and as web services director for WUTM has been the highlight of my time here.

Ms. Tomi McCutchen, this department is going to miss you so much. I appreciate our chats about life. You are one of the best people I know.

Last but certainly not least, Dr. Kayli Plotner, you have pushed me to my limits in the best way possible. You have put so much trust in my work, and I thank you for that. You've taught me so much and have made my time on The Pacer all worthwhile. From when I first met you at your trial class during your interview for UT Martin, I could tell you would be an asset for the department. I hope you aren't waiting for the day that I won't be messaging you with random updates, because that is happening for life.

Thank you, UT Martin. Thank you MMSC department. With that, unc is out!

Chloe Kent poses for a photo on April 12, 2026. ***(Pacer Photo / Miranda Conrad)***

Senior Farewell: Nate Szarzynski

Nate Szarzynski | Pacer Staff

When I heard of the Senior Farewell, I always dreaded writing my own. There is something about writing about myself that does not feel right or natural. With that being said, I decided to make the majority of mine a note of appreciation to those who have helped me get to this point in life.

Coming from Illinois, I had no idea what I was getting myself into. The transition from Chicagoland suburbs to small town Martin was not without adjustment. However, the thing that assisted in making new lifelong friends was the thing that brought me to Martin in the first place, a love of sports.

On my first day of college I decided to wear my newly acquired Pittsburgh Steelers Mitchell Trubisky jersey. I knew that if someone noticed and were to poke some fun at the jersey, I'd most likely have a friend for life. Well, that's exactly what happened.

Former Pacer staff member and UT Martin alumnus Connor Butts, who also happens to be a Chicago Bears fan, didn't hesitate to ask about the Trubisky jersey and from that point on he was my closest friend on campus. From the first day of college, to his graduation in December, Connor and I pushed each other to be better people, students and journalists and for that I am forever grateful.

In the Spring of 2024, we were told to come meet a new student who changed majors and had similar interests in becoming sports journalists. This was the first time I met Chyler Lee. From the first time I met Chyler, I knew he had a true passion for sports and media. Getting to witness Chyler grow into the excellent Editor-in-Chief he is today has truly been a privilege. His motor and high expectations is something I will forever admire and be thankful for.

(Pacer Photo by Chloe Kent)

In the Fall of 2024, Connor mentioned having a roommate who aspired to be in sports media and Connor wanted to recruit him to the Pacer staff. This was the arrival of William Stevens, The Pacer's honorary court jester and the funniest person I have ever met in my life. Will's sense of humor has taught me to lighten up more. Even the most stressful of situations need some laughter, and Will never fails to provide a reason for it. For that, I am beyond grateful.

Finally, the great Tomi McCutchen. I could have written this entire farewell about this woman. Words can never express the amount of gratitude and appreciation I have for all Ms. Tomi has done for me. I would not be graduating in May without the support she has given me. I would not have ever gotten involved or worked with the Pacer if Ms. Tomi did not twist my arm (jokingly) until I joined. With all of my heart and a tear in my eye, thank you.

For the final time as the Pacer's sports editor, goodbye and thank you for four years I'll never forget.

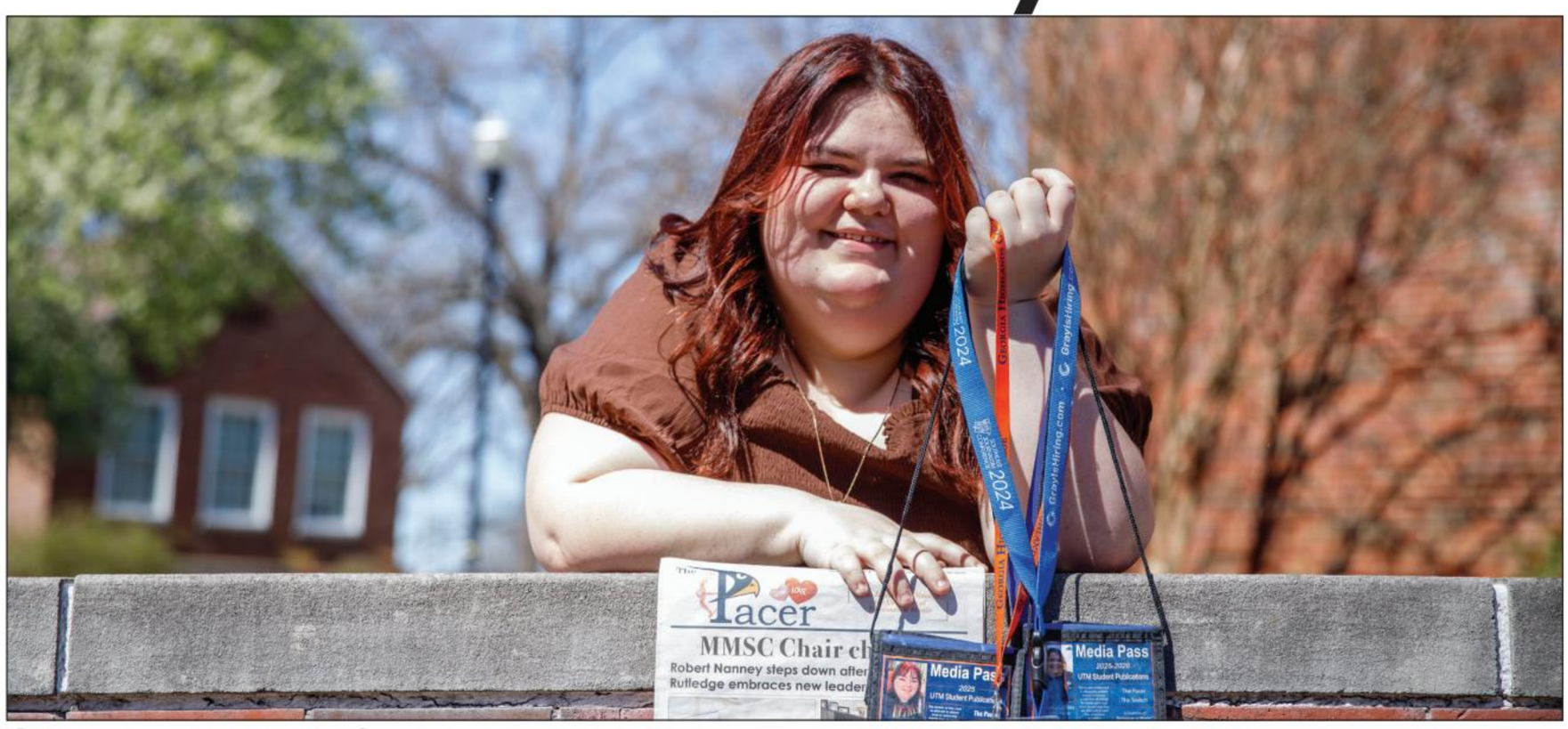
Senior Farewell: Bethany Collins

Bethany Collins | Pacer Staff

Oh, dear lordy, where do I begin?

I have spent the past four years of my college career working for a job that I originally thought was temporary. I knew about The Pacer because my mom worked on it during the summers while she was in college. She always told me I was a good writer and that I should go out for it. I thought, why not? It can be a nice way to get money until I get on staff at WUTM because I am a broadcast journalism major.

What happened next was a decision that would change my life forever. I walked into Gooch 319 at 4:45 p.m. on a Monday and was welcomed by the sweetest people I could ever meet. From my first article talking about true crime podcasts to this, I have never regretted that decision.



(Photo by Erika O'Brien)

I have always enjoyed writing, but I always thought of it as a hobby. I never knew this would become something I love so much and something so near and dear to my heart.

I have met so many amazing people here, from my first executive editor, Kaylee Michon, to Sarah Cornwell, to Trenton Michion, who graciously accepted me as his co-editor for viewpoints and became a friend I will always cherish, to Erika O'Brien, for being an amazing woman who was always in my corner and kept my head on straight while taking amazing photos. Those are some of the seniors who have graduated and have left me with amazing wisdom.

I used things I learned from them to help me run my section as Opinion Editor, and I would say it has been an amazing run. Now, I get to thank people who have helped me over the years.

To my writers—Laur, Gwen, Keenan, Cathleen—you have taught me so much about how to be a kind and understanding leader. I hope that I did right by you and helped you fall in love with opinion writing like I have. Thank you for trusting me, and I hope that you all continue to enjoy writing.

To my fellow editors, specifically Ethan, Bryant, Darby and Ryleigh (our non-senior editors): You guys have amazed me every day. Everything you have helped produce and done has been amazing, and I could not be prouder. You are people that I am so blessed to have met, and I know that the state of The Pacer is only going to become better as you continue to work and grow.

Now to my fellow graduating editors—Chloe, Chyler and Nate: We have been through a lot, Pacer and non-Pacer. I am so blessed to be graduating with such amazing people, and I am so glad I was able to work with you all for so long. Thank you for dealing with me, and I hope I didn't annoy you all too much.

To Jennifer, Aubrey and Izzy: Thank you for being my besties. I have loved being able to grow our relationship into what it is now and know that it is something to last. I know graduation won't be the last time we hang out, and I am ready to see where life takes us.

To Dr. Plotner: When I first met you during your interview, I knew that you would be perfect here. You took time to listen to a staff of baby journalists who had dreams and decided to take a chance on us. I thank you for that and for being a support that I can count on. While I wish I had more time to get to know you, I am so happy that I was able to have you as our adviser for my senior year. I already know The Pacer will be amazing under you, and I cannot wait to see just how much we grow under your leadership. You're an amazing advocate for us and treat us like real journalists, and it has been amazing.

To Ms. Tomi: For the three years I worked under you, I knew you always cared. That is something that never changed. I could not have been luckier to have such an amazing role model to look up to during the first few years at The Pacer when I was still finding myself. Thank you for always being an advocate for me and every person who ever worked for The Pacer.

To my professors: When they say the Mass Media and Strategic Communication Department is a family, you are the reason why. I always knew that I would have a home here, and I was never made to feel otherwise. Thank you, Skyhawks, for reading my articles or listening to Pacerpoints, or both.

‘Project Hail Mary’ shines bright in theaters

Bryant Steele | Pacer Staff

(Pacer Graphic / Darby Self)

There have been an abundance of good films as of late. It seems like production studios, casts and crews are doing their best to bring back an era of cinema we haven’t seen in a long time. This is especially evident with the recently released space odyssey “Project Hail Mary.”

“Project Hail Mary” released in theaters on Mar. 20, 2026. The film was distributed by Amazon MGM Studios and directed by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller, the duo behind successful films such as the “Spider-Verse” franchise, “The LEGO Movie,” and the rebooted “Jump Street” franchise. “Project Hail Mary” follows Dr. Ryland Grace (Ryan Gosling), a middle school teacher that finds himself on a mission to save the world from a solar extinction event. Along the way, he meets Rocky (James Ortiz), an alien organism that resembles a rock. After finding out that the same problem threatens both of their worlds, they must work together to find the solution amongst the stars.

The film is the adaptation of a 2021 science fiction novel of the same name written by American author Andy Weir. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM) acquired the rights to the book for $3 million in early 2020. Then in April 2024, Amazon MGM, who acquired MGM in 2022, announced that 2026 was the likely release window for the adaptation. Touted as the “#1 Film in the Universe,” the movie has already seen a massive amount of success since its release.

This is large in part due to the stellar performance by Ryan Gosling. There is rarely a moment throughout the entire film where Gosling is not on screen. The way he conveys loneliness, confusion and existential dread all within the opening sequence immerses the audience quickly. This may be Gosling’s best performance yet. To confirm this notion, you only need to look at the audience scores and critic reviews throughout his entire filmography and compare it to his role as Ryland Grace. His character goes beyond that confusion and dread. When he solves a problem, he gets excited. This, in turn, excites the audience because they want to see him succeed due to his character being a relatable one. Grace isn’t a grandiose archetype; he laughs, he cries and he gets scared when faced with the possibility of dying or being alone. He doesn’t see himself as a hero, but over time he turns into one. His character arc, although not in chronological order, allows the audience to grow with him as he travels through the Milky Way galaxy aboard the Hail Mary.

At the beginning of the film, Grace wakes up with retrograde amnesia aboard the Hail Mary, a spacecraft designed by the nations of Earth for deep space exploration. After discovering that he’s stranded in space and the only other two passengers aboard the Hail Mary are deceased, Grace falls into despair. A flashback reveals that Grace is a middle school teacher and disgraced former molecular biologist. Some of his students wish to know more about what scientists are calling the Petrova line, an infrared line between the Sun and Venus.

Despite his protest, Grace is coerced into explaining the line to the class. He tells them that microorganisms found in the Petrova line, known as astrophage, are dimming the Sun. He also tells them that this will result in the drastic cooling of Earth over the next 30 years. After class, Grace is recruited by Eva Stratt (Sandra Hüller), a government agent, to join a team of scientists that have been gathered from all around the globe to study this problem. We later discover that this operation is referred to as Project Hail Mary.

The project involves a suicide mission to Tau Ceti, the only nearby star in the galaxy that is undimmed by astrophage. As Grace is approaching Tau Ceti, he spots an alien ship. After the ship voluntarily docks with the Hail Mary, Grace boards it to explore.

As he nears what appears to be an entrance, he meets an alien organism and names the creature Rocky. Rocky is also the sole survivor on his ship, but now that he and Grace have found each other, neither will be alone. Grace discovers that Rocky is at Tau Ceti for the same reason that he is, to discover a solution to the astrophage outbreak. The pair decide that working together would be best for both of their planets’ futures.

Watching Grace and Rocky travel through space together is made even better by the cinematography and special effects throughout the film. It was shot for IMAX using Arri Alexa 65 cameras with an aspect ratio of 2.1:1. The sensor is used with anamorphic lenses tilted at a right angle, 90 degrees, to create the standard IMAX aspect ratio of 1.43:1. Different aspect ratios are used when scenes from the past are intercut with scenes from the present. This, and a slight lens blur, makes the viewer feel as if they really are attempting to recover lost memories from the past. This is just one of the many ways that cinematography is incorporated into “Project Hail Mary” to bring it to life.

The visual special effects were completed through a large collaboration by Framestore, Industrial Light & Magic, Sony Pictures Imageworks, BUF, and Wylie Co. VFX. Despite sounding like it would be congested with a multitude of ideas and effects, the teams actually work really well together to make every effect look solid and not out of place when compared to other effects throughout the film. At one point in the film, Grace finds himself engulfed in a form of light. While this scene could have easily been blinding and unnatural, the light is actually warm and gentle. It feels like a natural occurrence in nature instead of a computer generated scene filmed on a studio lot. This dedication to making the film look and feel beautiful further adds to the depth of the immersive world of “Project Hail Mary.”

When taking into account every element of this film, it’s easy to see how it has had the success that it has earned. “Project Hail Mary” has grossed over $300 million globally and received critical appraise from both fans and critics. It’s 95% certified fresh on Rotten Tomatoes, with its reviewers calling it a masterpiece. A career defining performance by Ryan Gosling combined with stunning visuals creates an immersive experience that bodes well for the rest of cinema in 2026. Only time will tell if the story of Grace and Rocky can keep up with the rest of this year’s stacked card.

Flight Crew hosts Cowboy Crawdad crawfish boil

Martin Shields | Pacer Staff

The Houston Kelly Band perform at the annual Cowboy Crawdad crawfish boil at UT Martin on April 6, 2026.

(Pacer Photo / Chloe Kent)

On Monday, April 6, the University of Tennessee at Martin Flight Crew and UTM Residence Life hosted Cowboy Crawdad, a crawfish boil on the Connor Community Lawn from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m.

The annual event kicked off UTM Rodeo Week and brought students together for food, music and time to hang out outside as the semester continues and the weather begins to warm up.

The event started early for many students, with several people arriving early and lining up to get inside. Entry to the event was free for students when they presented their event passes.

Not long after the event began, tables began filling up as students arrived on the Connor Community Lawn. Some students came in groups, while others met up with friends once they got inside.

The area became more active as the night went on. Groups of friends sat together eating and talking, while others walked around to explore everything that was offered. The crawfish boil was the main attraction of the event, being a hotspot where students gathered around to get food and chat before finding a place to sit and socialize.

In addition to the food, there were also opportunities for students to win prizes. Items like light-up cowboy hats and UTM Rodeo tickets were given away for free, giving students something extra to enjoy during the event. Students were also able to join in on activities like cornhole, while some focused more on spending time with friends and enjoying the atmosphere. The variety of activities available helped keep people engaged throughout the night.

The Houston Kelly Band performed during the event, providing live music throughout the night. The band’s performance added to the overall feel of the event and helped keep the energy up.

The warm weather, music and food made the crawfish boil a good place for people to spend time together and take a break from school and other responsibilities. Many students said they enjoyed the event.

“It was amazing,” said UT Martin freshman Calvin Osborne. “The food was fantastic, and it was nice to hang around people.”

Several organizations on the UT Martin campus host various events throughout the semester, giving students more chances to get involved and spend time with others outside of class, especially as the end of the semester approaches. Students can use Runway or check their email to see what events what events by Flight Crew, UTM Residence Life and other organizations are happening soon.

Dancing With the Skyhawks brings UTM together

Ja'Tyria Greer | Pacer Staff

Kameron Echols and Emma Harris perform during Dancing with the Skyhawks on April 7, 2026, in the Watkins Auditorium.
(Photo provided by University Relations)

Dancing with the Skyhawks brought energy, creativity and community spirit to the University of Tennessee at Martin campus as students, faculty and staff took to the stage in a competition inspired by the popular television show "Dancing with the Stars."

Hosted by the Student Government Association and the UTM Dance Education Program, the event aimed to create a new tradition that would bring different parts of campus together in a fun and engaging way. SGA President Bailey Parker said the idea came from a desire to try something different from the organization's usual programming.

"Every year we host the faculty-versus-students athletics game, but I wanted to take a different approach and our SGA wanted to try something different," said Parker. "I was a big fan of Dancing with the Stars this season, and I was like 'why don't we bring that to UT Martin?'"

Parker said the goal was to create an event that allowed participants to step outside of their usual roles and connect on a more personal level. By pairing students with faculty and staff, the competition encouraged collaboration and built relationships across campus.

"It was a lot of business trying to get staff involved and bring staff and students together outside of that professional environment and more into a fun sort of setting," said Parker. "I think it was definitely a success in that aspect, and I'm very happy about the outcome."

The competition featured multiple pairs who performed choreographed routines in front of a panel of judges and a lively audience. Each performance showcased a mix of technical skill, personality and creativity as participants worked to impress both the judges and their peers.

JC Burnett-Gordon, an assistant professor of dance in the Department of Visual and Theatre Arts, described the atmosphere of the event in three phrases: "fun", "energetic" and "Skyhawk community."

One anticipated performance did not take place, as Chancellor Yancy Freeman and his wife were unable to perform due to Freeman sustaining a shoulder injury in an unrelated event.

The night ultimately came down to a winning pair who stood out for their connection and stage presence. Judges emphasized that they were looking for more than just strong choreography. They focused on the chemistry between partners and the ability to engage the audience throughout the performance.

Taking home the top honor was the duo of Kameron Echols, director of Student Leadership and Campus Culture, and Emma Harris, a junior social work major from Lexington, Tennessee, whose routine captured both the energy of the event and the spirit of collaboration it was designed to promote.

Echols said winning the competition was an exciting and rewarding experience.

"Oh, it feels amazing," said Echols. "I think the best part of it was really participating with students and enjoying and having a good time. Emma was my partner; she did a fantastic job. She brought the energy."

For Harris, the experience was just as meaningful as the outcome. She said the opportunity to perform and connect with others made the event memorable.

"I'm so excited; I had so much fun," said Harris.

Beyond the competition itself, the event highlighted the importance of community at UT Martin. By bringing together students, faculty and staff in a shared experience, Dancing with the Skyhawks created a sense of unity that extended beyond the stage. Judges noted that the event meant a lot to the Martin community, emphasizing how it fostered connection and school spirit. The focus on partnership and collaboration reflected the broader goal of strengthening relationships across campus.

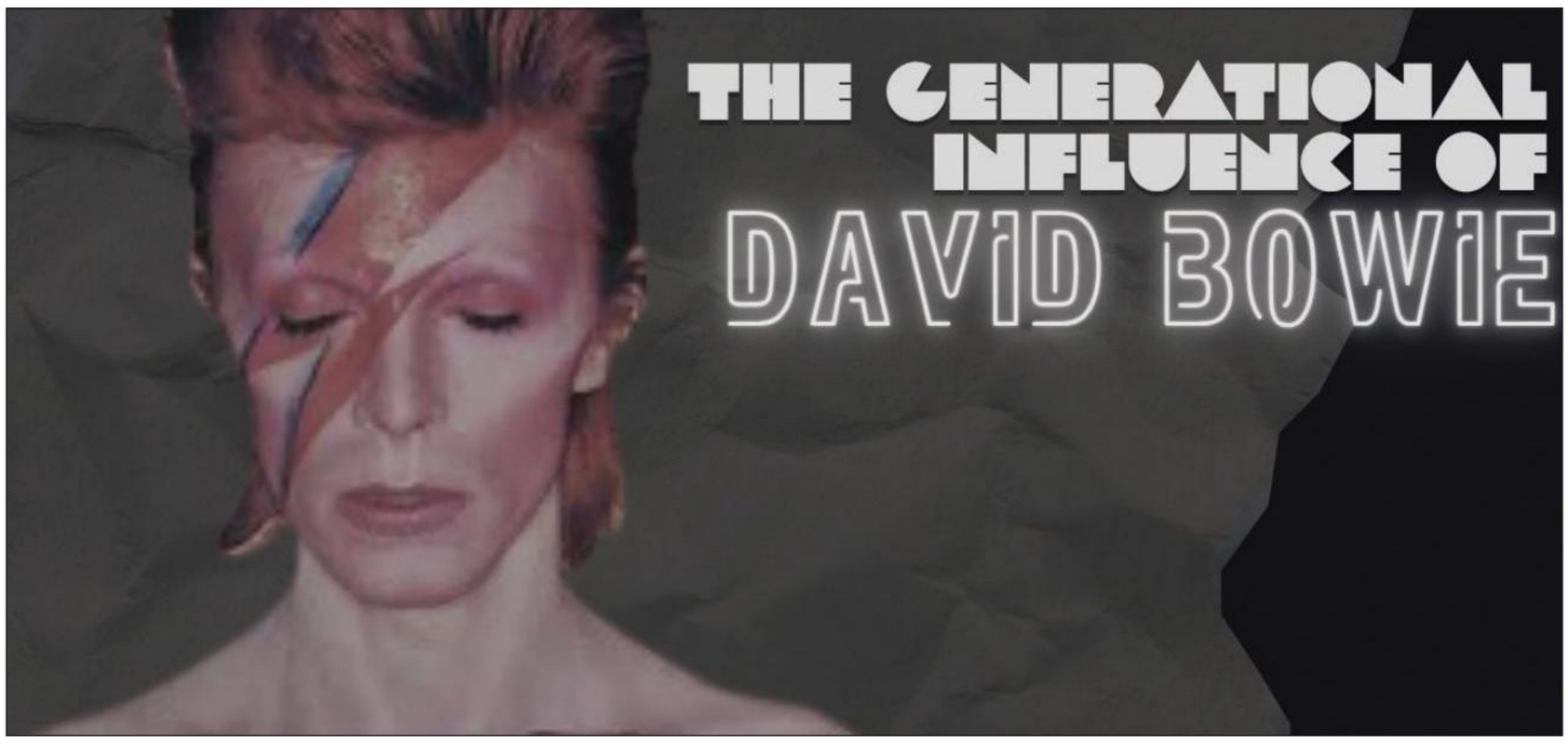
As the music faded and the winners were announced, the success of the event was clear not just in the performances, but in the enthusiasm of those who participated and attended. With strong support and positive feedback, Dancing with the Skyhawks hopes to become a new staple of campus life, that offers a fresh way for the Skyhawk community to come together and celebrate one another.

For Parker and Burnett-Gordon, the event represents more than just a one-night competition. It serves as an example of how creativity and collaboration can bring people together in meaningful ways.

"I'm very happy about the outcome," said Parker. "It was definitely a success."

The generational influence of David Bowie

Isaiah Murphy | Pacer Staff



(Pacer Graphic / Sophia Phillips)

During the '70s, David Bowie was one of the most interesting characters in pop culture. He dressed odd, wore heavy amounts of makeup, acted as characters, etc.

Due to how he experimented with several different sounds, every Bowie album you bought would sound more distinct than the last. He would likely be portraying an entirely different character as well. One week he was "Ziggy Stardust," a rock and roll playing flamboyant alien, and the next he was the "Thin White Duke," who sparked controversial statements that Bowie deemed "in character."

Bowie broke ground and changed Rock & Roll with his lavish performances and costumes. Without Bowie's flair for the dramatic, it's unlikely we'd see acts like KISS and Alice Cooper dress up the way they did. The concept of Daft Punk being two DJ robots doesn't seem possible without Bowie's influence and stagecraft. While you can credit Marc Bolan and his band T. Rex for starting the glam rock genre and style, Bowie popularized it and took it to another level with Ziggy Stardust.

With the roll around of Ziggy Stardust and the glam rock genre as a whole, fashion became incorporated into rock & roll itself. If you look at today's hip hop scene, the fashion is almost important as the music itself. While it's definitely a stretch to connect this back to David Bowie, it's still interesting to think about.

In terms of the music Bowie was creating, he really was all over the place. In 1976, he released "Station to Station", an album based on his "Thin White Duke" persona. The record was a funk rock work with hints of Krautrock, a new genre in Germany at the time. Then only a year later, he completely ditches the funk rock motif and goes all in on the new Krautrock experiment. During this period, he ended up creating his electronic rock masterpiece, "Low." This was an electronic rock experiment made in Berlin by Bowie, with help from producers Tony Visconti and Brian Eno. This was part of the "Berlin Trilogy", which was composed of "Low", "Heroes" and finally "Lodger."

"Lodger" is another great example of Bowie's diversity in sound. The album took inspiration from world music on the first half of the record, before returning to his more established electronic rock sound on the second half. Bowie's music provided influence on acts like the Cure, Bauhaus, Joy Division, Radiohead, etc. Bowie had such a large impact on rock & roll that our generation has unfortunately begun to forget. In case there are those of you out there needing a recommendation, "The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars," "Aladdin Sane" and "Low" are all phenomenal works by one of history's greatest artist.

UTM steel band concert hosts noteworthy guest

Ethan Tanner | Pacer Staff

The UT Martin Music Department hosted a unique steel band concert including special guest Jaden Teague-Núñez on Tuesday, April 9 at 7:30 p.m. in the Blankenship Recital Hall.

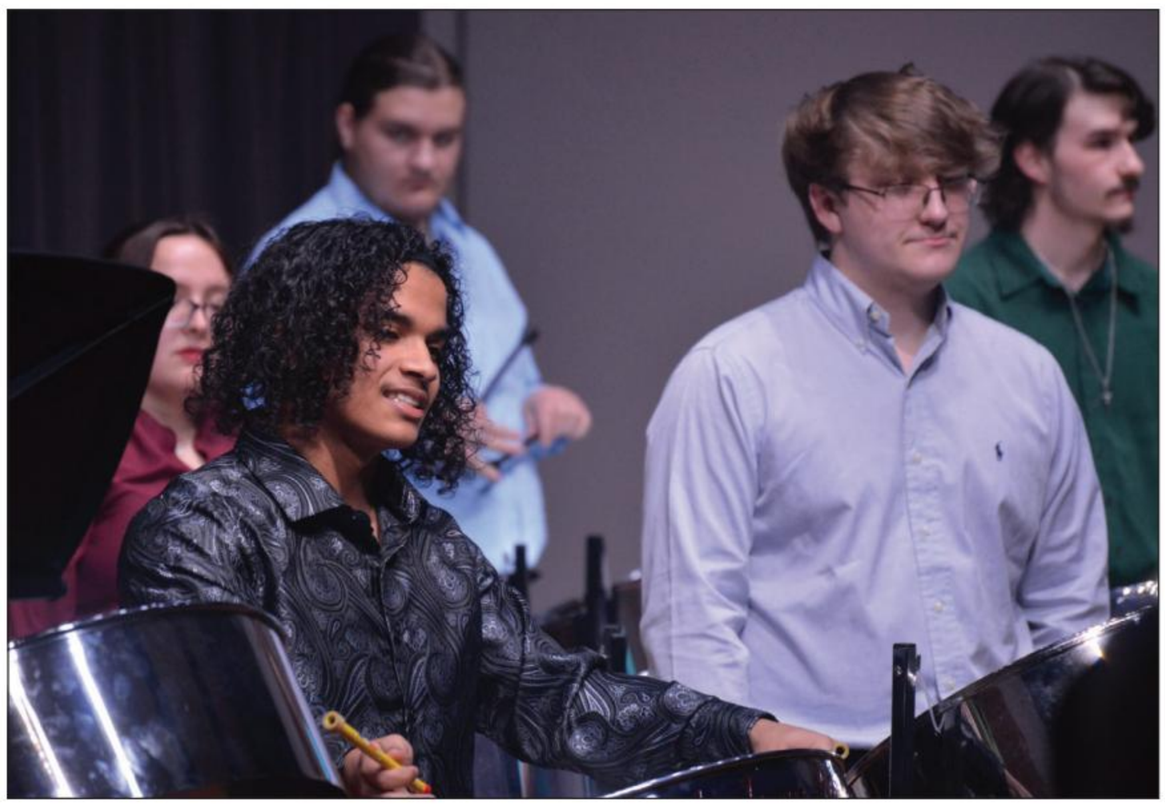
The performers consisted of seven steel pannists along with a variety of other percussionists. As expected, the winner of Chicago Symphony Orchestra's Young Artist Competition, Jaden Teague-Núñez, remained front and center as a frequent soloist throughout many of the pieces.

Within minutes, the recital hall was filled with the lively, exotic rhythms emitted from the steel pans.

Amongst the most recognizable was Baja, a traditional song that had a lively, tropical feel that spread across the room as Teague-Núñez led the group through the song.

After reciting a selection of joyful, carefree numbers with the band, Teague-Núñez went on to recite an unorthodox solo steel pan piece titled "A Visit to Hell," written by his father, Liam Teague, director of steel pan studies at Northern Illinois University.

Accompanied by UTM's director of keyboard studies, Professor Chan-Mi Jean, Teague-Núñez recited the eery piece with expert concentration, gently tapping the steel pan to create a creeping feeling.



Nunez-Teague showcases his unique talent of playing the steel pan in the Blankenship Recital Hall Thursday, April 9, in Martin, Tenn. ***(Pacer Photo/Ethan Tanner)***

The piece lasted for about 10 minutes, and Teague-Núñez would grow more intense with each beat of the steel pan, creating a chaotic and uneasy composition far different from the traditional casual steel pan pieces. After completing that piece, he went on to showcase his masterful skill at the piano with "Prelude in C-sharp Minor, Opus 3 No. 2" by Sergei Rachmaninoff, before finishing strong with the rest of the ensemble in "Playdate" and "Squirrels," two pieces written by his father.

Teague-Núñez had travelled to various destinations across the country to perform because of his unique expertise at playing the steel pan, and was very much pleased with his visit at UT Martin.

"I thought it was a really great experience. The students here are so great, and they're so lovely to work with. I got a chance to even work with one of the students here, Michael. He is doing a lot more jazz stuff, and he was sounding great," he said. "I think he has a lot of potential. It was just a really fun time to be here."

Senior percussion major Michael Morales of Lincoln County had a great experience playing in the steel band and becoming acquainted with the rising star.

"If you know steel band, you will know the name Teague. And he's really living up to that. I've seen him play before, but getting a chance to play next to him and get to work with him has been unreal," he said.

Jacob Hargrove, professor of percussion activities, was glad with the concert's success and looks forward to see what the steel band's future may hold.

"I think it would be really great if people get involved in this. We could see about bringing in people that maybe have never even played an instrument before. I think it would be really great to do that," he said.

The UT Martin steel band class will be offered in the coming academic school year, with very few requirements for registration.

Skyhawk men's basketball loses a nation-leading 15 players to NCAA transfer portal

Chyler Lee | Pacer Staff

A transfer list that started with the announcement of star freshman Matas Deniusas' intent to enter on March 11, has now expanded to 15 Skyhawks since the opening of the NCAA transfer portal on April 7. The mass exodus leads the nation by two with the NIU Huskies just behind with 13 in the portal.

Other departures include junior guard Andrija Bukumirović, who led the team in points (13.8) and rebounds (7.8), along with freshman guard Filip Petkovski, sophomore guard Filip Radaković, sophomore guard Dragos Lungu, junior guard Afan Trnka, freshman guard Pedro Santos, freshman guard Damien King, junior forward Lamine Niang, freshman forward Ama Sow and freshman guard Ty Price.

Two players have been with second-year head coach Jeremy Shulman for their entire careers— Bukumirović and Trnka.

After Bukumirović's transfer announcement, Shulman posted on his X account, "So excited for Andrija!!! Andrija has been with me side-by-side for 3 years, working, developing, winning—and now he has a chance to make really good money for his Senior year!! Happy for you my guy!!!"

Something that stands out with the continued loss of players is Shulman's positive attitude toward the ups and downs of the transfer portal.

On April 6, Shulman posted on his X account, "Coaches - with the portal opening up tomorrow, feel free to hit me about our players who are leaving. I did JUCO and AAU for 27 years, so I know how the game goes. Also, if we are interested in one of your players, we will hit you up as well."

UTM Head Coach Jeremy Shulman goes over plays during a timeout during the basketball game against Little Rock on Feb. 3, 2026, at the Elam Center in Martin Tenn. ***(Pacer Photo / Kaniya Anthony)***

This combined with senior forward Luca Colceag and senior forward AJ Hopkins graduating leaves the Skyhawks with 17 empty roster spots going into the 2026-2027 season. After one of the best seasons since 2008, the Skyhawks now look at a roster reset.

Just two players remain from the 2025-2026 season, freshman guard Enrique Moya and freshman forward Vladimir Khryapa.

Moya spent the 2024-2025 season in the Spain U19 for Cuerva FCBG before coming to joining the Skyhawks this past season.

Khryapa, son of former NBA first round pick Viktor Khryapa, came to UT Martin from Golden State Prep in Napa, California. Khryapa appeared in 30 games in the 2025-2026 season for the Skyhawks and averaged 2.3 points per game, 2.5 rebounds per game and one steal per game in those appearances.

One of those roster spots will be filled by 2026 guard commit Nikola Janicic, who recently committed to the Skyhawks. Janicic averaged 22.6 points(1st), 5.4 rebounds and 4.1 assists per game(7th) on his way to a first-place finish in FIBA EuroBasket-Division B and an eventual championship for North Macedonia at just 18-years-old.

Janicic will be just one of many new faces to appear in the Tom and Kathleen Elam Center next season for the Skyhawks, as they search to build a new team almost entirely from scratch.

Transfer portal strikes UTM women's basketball

William Stevens | Pacer Staff

The transfer portal is a very controversial topic in the world of NCAA sports, but for now it is here to stay and this is how the UT Martin Skyhawks women's basketball team has been affected.

On Thursday, April 9, 2026, the longest tenured UT Martin women's basketball player, junior guard Kenley McCarn announced on Instagram that she will enter the transfer portal.

Players that have entered include sophomore guard Grace Billington, junior forward Norah Clark, freshman guard Nyjha Webster, freshman forward Yar Tong, freshman forward Cam Ward, freshman guard Sidney Blackwell and others.

With these players entering the transfer portal, BCAT hall of fame head coach Kevin McMillan has some work to do.

The toughest loss for the Skyhawks is McCarn who started and played in all 30 games this past season. McCarn averaged 15.8 points per game (PPG) and 5.3 rebounds per game (RPG) on the season. She also added 50 total steals. McCarn was praised by teammates for her hard work and dedication on and off the courts. McCarn also has previously given praise to many teammates and assistant coach Shane Sisco.

The second leading scorer for the Skyhawks, Sophomore forward Zy Thompson, has also decided to throw her name into the transfer portal pot. Thompson averaged 10.9 PPG while leading the team in rebounds at 5.9 RPG. Thompson was a key post player for the Skyhawks, although she struggled at the free throw line having the most attempts at 119 only converting 68 of them shooting just above .500.

On top of losing Thompson, the Skyhawks also lose two young forwards in Ward and Tong. The two freshmen had bright futures as the next key post players for the Skyhawks but have ultimately decided to test the transfer portal waters.

Other big hits for McMillan's Skyhawks are Billington and junior guard Brittani Wells. Billington, a Murray State transfer, only averaged 5.4 PPG but served as a spot up shooter, stepping up for the Skyhawks in a few games. Wells was also a top guard for UT Martin averaging 8.9 PPG and being the only player along side McCarn to play in and start all 30 games.

Clark is another big that has entered the transfer portal. Although Clark is a junior, she had flashes of being next up for the Skyhawks. Injuries did hold Clark back slightly, but she was an all around team player and had high praise from both teammates and coaches. Clark averaged 6.7 PPG and 2.7 RPG.

UT Martin players cheer on their teammate during the basketball game against Tennessee Tech on Feb. 26, 2026, at the Elam Center in Martin, Tenn. ***(Pacer Photo / Kaniya Anthony)***

A key piece McMillan was able to hold onto is Freshman guard Sidni Middleton. Middleton has a bright future as a Skyhawk. She averaged 9.1 PPG, 4.1 RPG, 37 total assist and 31 total steals. Middleton was able to accumulate these stats while playing only 26 games, starting in 22. Middleton also had the highest free throw percentage at .928 making 64 of 69 attempts.

Other players that plan to return are freshman forward Kennedy Horton, senior guard Destinee Wells and freshman forward Mikayla Lambert.

With Just four girls remaining from the past season McMillan will now begin the recruiting process in an attempt to get the Skyhawk women's basketball team back on track.

The Masters: Rory McIlroy emerges again

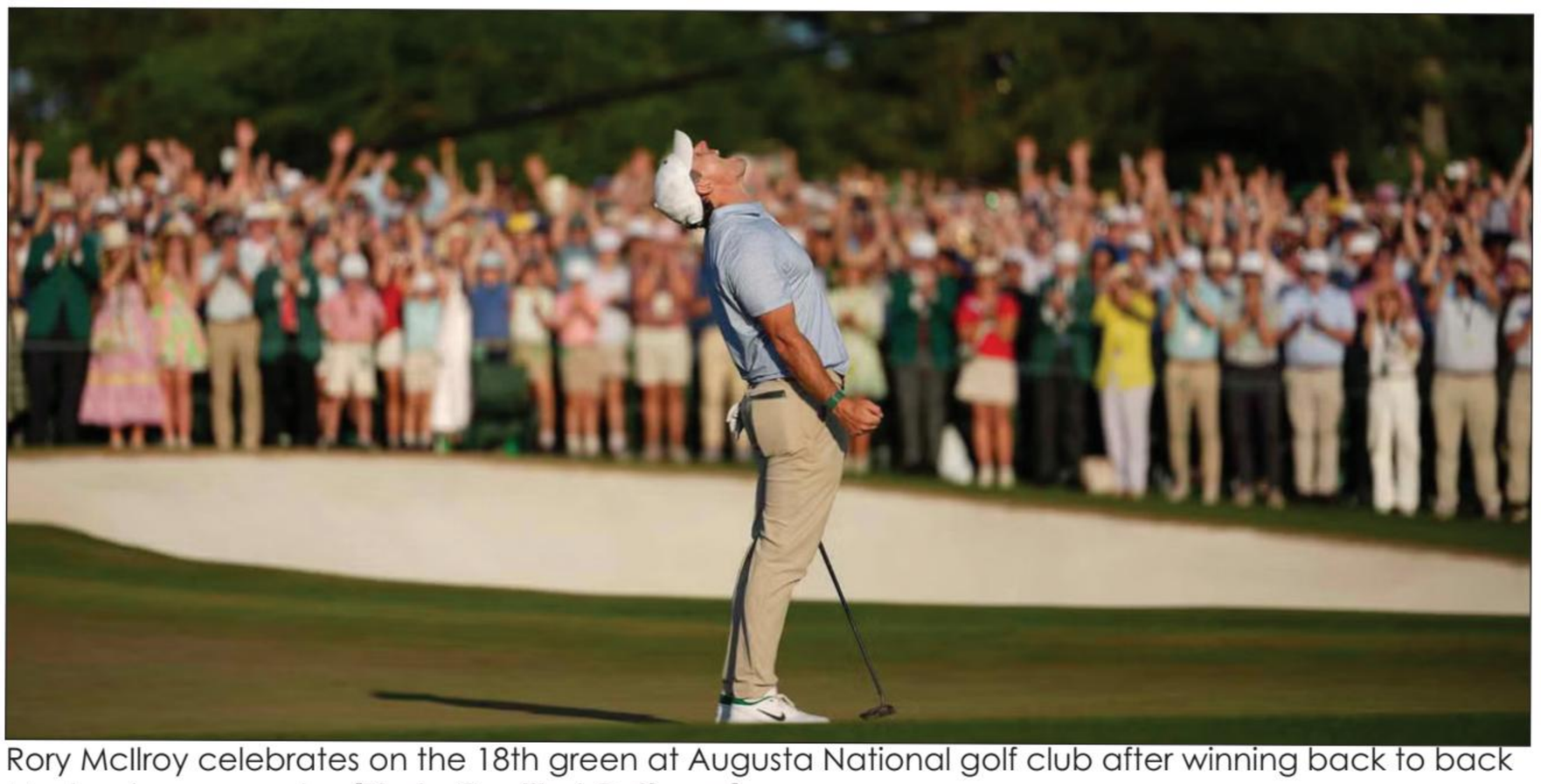
William Stevens | Pacer Staff

History has been made with Rory McIlroy as just the fourth player to win back-to-back Masters. McIlroy joined elite company in Jack Nicklaus, Tiger Woods and Nick Faldo. In addition, McIlroy was the first player to win back-to-back Masters since Woods did in 2001 and 2002--over two decades ago.

The Masters is always a standout sports event with the prestige that is holds. Its history, tradition and difficulty continue to uphold the tournament as one a fan favorite and one of the most respected events in all of sports.

Some big surprises included Bryson Dechambeau not making the cut after becoming the second player to win back-to-back tournaments in LIV just this past march. Dechambeau also made headlines using a 3D printed five iron. Along with Bryson Dechambeau not making the cut, there were other notable names that missed the +4 cut: Bubba Watson, J.J. Spaun, Akshay Bhatia, Min Woo Lee, Fred Couples and Vijay Singh.

Day three made for one of the most exciting days. Shane Lowry made a hole-in-one on the par-three 6th adding to his already stacked hole-in-one resume. Scottie Scheffler made the cut after finishing even on day two, which led to him shooting 7-under on day three to make a late round serge. McIlroy was able to hold a six shot lead going into day three, which he would lose after shooting a 73 1-over score allowing Cameron Young to tie him going into day four.



Rory McIlroy celebrates on the 18th green at Augusta National golf club after winning back to back Masters tournaments. ***(Photo Credits / Golf.com)***

With day three setting up day four to be generational, it did not disappoint. With a green jacket in his sights Scheffler came out and shot 7-under a few holes in front of McIlroy in hopes of a blow up. Scheffler's score of 133 over the weekend was a personal best for him, he also became the first player in the last 84 years to go bogey-free on the final 36 holes at the Masters. By hole 17, Scheffler needed McIlroy to go 2-over on the last two holes. Luckily for McIlroy, he would go par on 17 and bogey on 18--holding onto to the one shot lead and winning his second masters.

Some other players that shined on day four were Tyrrell Hatton who shot 6-under and found himself tied for third. Alongside Hatton was Russell Henley and Collin Morikawa who both shot 4-under and finished tied for third and seventh, respectively.

Jason Day, who started day four tied for third, had his worst round of the four days on day four. Day shot a 3-over to drop almost 10 spots and finish tied for 12th.

The final hole came down to McIlroy. It was his to win. Off the tee, he found himself sitting on some pine needles after a bad drive. He then, from the pine needles, hit an aggressive approach and found himself short of the green in the green side bunkers. Then with about a 20 foot putt, all he needed was to make it in two. After securing the two-putt, McIlroy could put the green jacket on once again.

Now McIlroy has a chance to become the first golfer to three-peat at the Masters. The closest to the mark was Nick Faldo who, after winning back-to-back green jackets, tied for 12th at the following tournament.

Skyhawks notch two first place finishes at 58th annual UT Martin Spring Rodeo

Chyler Lee | Pacer Staff

UT Martin sophomore Cooper Stone tracks a calf in the calf roping event at the 58th annual UT Martin Spring College Rodeo on Saturday, April 11, 2026. **(Pacer Photo / Chyler Lee)**

Two Skyhawks finished on top at the 58th annual University of Tennessee at Martin Spring College Rodeo on April 11 in a packed house at the Ned McWherter Agricultural Complex.

The Skyhawk men placed second overall with 485 points with sophomore Cooper Stone (21.8) leading the way with a first-place finish in calf roping and a fourth-place finish in team roping. The women placed fifth overall with 80 points on the weekend led by senior barrel racer Allie Maxwell. Maxwell posted a dominant performance in barrel racing throughout the weekend as she finished first in the opening go (13.41), the short round (13.55) and field average (26.69). It was a performance Maxwell said felt "absolutely unreal."

"It's just—I can't even put words to it," said Maxwell. "It's an absolute dream come true to do this in front of my home crowd, my senior year. It really just all fell into place all at the right time."

It is hard to beat the atmosphere of the UT Martin rodeo along with a packed crowd, the talents of pro rodeo clown Dusty Myers and the enthusiastic voice of announcer Garrett Yerigan. The crowd roared to life with every event and the Skyhawk men and women did not disappoint.

Just behind Stone was junior Owen Larrick (22.4) and graduate student Clint Southworth (22.8) who finished second and third respectively in average. Larrick also placed first in the short round with a time of 11.4 seconds. Freshman steer wrestler Daniel Wilder put points on the board with a fifth-place finish in the average (11.7) and a third-place performance in the short round (4.5). A Skyhawk duo of Tate Ondrik and Colton Whittymore placed fifth in calf roping with a time of 9.4.

For the women, junior Anna Wilder finished with a second-place finish in the second go (13.62) and fourth place finish overall.

This year's rodeo doubled the participation of last year with around 400 student athletes who paid to participate, according to UT Martin Athletics director Kurt McGuffin.

The rodeo at UT Martin is a staple of the season, and McGuffin acknowledged the work it takes to continue that standard.

"It takes a lot of hard work from a lot of people, but it's always good to have this many people come to Martin. It's been a busy weekend, but our rodeo kids work hard all year and then we get to showcase it here," McGuffin said. "Usually, it's voted the best college rodeo east of the Mississippi and that's what we want to continue to have here."

The success is all credited to fifth-year head coach Chase Thrasher, who, as a former UT Martin Rodeo student-athlete himself, has continued the success and history of the program.

"He took over for a legend and that's hard to do being so young," McGuffin said. "So, I'm really proud of what he's accomplished here."

The squad's next stop is Arkansas Tech in Searcy, Arkansas, where they will compete from Thursday, April 16 to Saturday, April 18.

TJ Grines makes UTM history, leads by example

Nate Szarzynski | Pacer Staff

The UT Martin Skyhawks baseball team have gone 10-1 in their last 11 games at home following a series win over the Tennessee Tech Golden Eagles at Skyhawk Field and improved their season record to 18-17.

UT Martin took both games one and two by a combined score of 19-10. In the final game of the series, Tennessee Tech came back and defeated UT Martin in a high scoring affair, 18-16.

This series saw not only high scoring offense and shaky pitching performances, but also a record-breaking performance from one of UT Martin's own.

In game three of the series, UT Martin senior UTL TJ Grines added two more steals to his season totals, surpassing his former teammate Jalen Fithian and claiming the number one spot on the all-time UT Martin Division I single season steals record with 38 total steals and counting.

In addition, Grines became UT Martin's all-time leader in career stolen bases during the Division I era with 53 total, passing Trey Karlen (51), in steals and with plenty of games left to play in the regular season.

UT Martin's head coach Ryan Jenkins had nothing but praise for the teams lead-off hitter.

"He (Grines) is outstanding. He's a great player and I am very happy to have him," said Jenkins. "He has great tools. He has the ability to run and hit and do everything. TJ is just a great baseball player."

Taking big lead-offs and stealing bases can be quite thrilling. Grines said the thrill of being active on the bases brings him tons of enjoyment.

"When I get on the bases I just feel free," said Grines. "I really like running and just showing off my speed."

Grines was well aware of the steals record. Grines views the achievement as a consequence of his own hard work and dedication that he has put in his entire life.

"It means the world to me," said Grines. "I have put in a lot of hard work and it is finally paying off. I am just happy I get to show people what I can do."

Jenkins made sure to not only credit Grines the player, but also Grines the person.

"All that said he's an even better person. He's a leader in the clubhouse, he does everything the right way and he's mature," said Jenkins. "You couldn't ask for a better guy to be on the team."

Grines has his leadership philosophy down to a simple motto; lead by example.

"My goal is to lead by example. I don't really say too much, because I am a real reserved guy," said Grines. " If I see my teammates down, I try to pick them up and let them feed off my energy."

TJ Grines (3) runs to third base at the UT Martin baseball game at Skyhawk Baseball Field on April 10, 2026. ***(Pacer Photo / Chloe Kent)***